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# Lingualisms Of Students At a Black University

By Joan Curl Elliott

In the United States minority groups develop dialects easily in isolated ghettos. A dialect promotes feelings of group identity and group cohesiveness. At the same time the United States has a mobile society which causes the mixing and leveling of dialects. In addition, the influence of mass media and compulsory education have worked against the broader dialectical elements, both regional and social. This does not mean that dialect differences have disappeared. But it does mean that the range of variation has been reduced. Most people in the United States try to make their usage of English more standard as they desire more middle class status. Although the university is the bearer of language and culture, one sees the use of lingualisms peculiar to this special environment.

This article provides the reader with some basic idioms and fixed expressions current in Black English on a predominantly Black college campus. Although the Black student uses and expects to use standard English in the classroom, he still employs expressions and phrases from his own neighborhood dialect. The lingualisms show the imagination in the use of figurative and metaphorical speech of the students. From it one can see how a living language grows and develops. The students find pleasure in word coinage and word phrasing.

From the arrival of Blacks in the United States to the present day, certain expressions are considered part of Black English. During the migration of Southern Blacks to Northern urban areas in the 1920s and 1930s, linguists began to notice a living daughter language of English, called Black English or Ghetto English. During the 1950s and 1960s, the assertive Blacks of the civil rights movement began to have their impact on the structure of American society. At the same time, Blacks became culturally conscious, including language.

The rise of Black awareness, the need for group identity, the recognition of

Black culture and a positive concept of self contributed further to the recognition of Black speech. It was not really until the late 1950s that Blacks acknowledged their own dialects. For a dialect, to them, meant erroneous and imperfect English.

Within the Black community, speech remains fairly uniform because the speakers are in constant contact and influence one another. The rate at which the speech of one community diverges from that of the other will depend partly on the degree of difference between their ways of life and, partly, on the intensity of communication between them. Because communication has been poor between Black and white groups in the United States, the rate of divergence has been high. Hence, the continuation of the ghetto dialect within standard American.

A factor, however, which works recently in the favor of Black dialects is "pride." The people have their own expressions and lingualisms and use them to block out outsiders. Many so-called Black lingualisms become everyday expressions in standard American. Almost every American by now uses or knows the meaning of "got it all together," "cool," "Square," "the man," "split," and so on. However, many expressions remain limited to the ghetto.

Words can go through the process of amelioration or deterioration. More words deteriorate than ameliorate in standard English. In dialects there is a more rapid rate of the deterioration than amelioration of words. If the standard language accepts a word from a sub-dialect, then that word deteriorates for the dialect while it has ameliorated for the standard language. For example, "rock and roll" and "sock it to me" were originally Black terms referring to sex. After the white community adopted them, they lost their sexual connotations. "Rock and Roll" became a name for a type of music while "sock it to me" meant to entertain one. These terms were dropped by the ghetto dwellers.

Conversion is the transfer of a word from one grammatical category to another—for



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example, from noun to verb or from adjective to noun or from preposition to verb.

The word Black was originally only an adjective (as in black hat); later it came to be used also as a noun (to wear black) and as a verb (to black boots). Because of its contrast to white, it took on negative connotations in Western society. Blacks recently have set out to establish the positive connotations of black and to make the word into a noun. They forced a new meaning on the nation for the word "black." Black was originally a descriptive adjective. It has become a noun and represents the ethnic group. Black is now positive as far as people are concerned.

One process by which words come into the standard language is by borrowing from regional dialects or from the language of specialized groups within the speech community. Such borrowing are called internal loans. An internal loan is not a new word, but it is a new acquisition as far as the general vocabulary of the language is concerned. The word "soul" (inner being) is a synonym for the word "black" (soulfood, soul brother, soul sister). "Right on" has been borrowed by the standard language as a synonym for "right," "naturally," or "of course." "Right on" is more emphatic than "right" or "naturally". The speaker who uses "right on" is in complete agreement with his talking partner.

The difference between Black English and standard American is the pronunciation of sounds or the use of lingualisms. Differences in pronunciation may be due to geographic reasons, social mobility of speakers, effect of the media, isolation of speech community or migration of a group of speakers. When a social group goes up or down in the world, its pronunciation will gain or lose prestige. The steady infiltration of Blacks in the ranks of the affluent affects the pronunciation of Black speakers, as well as white ones.

In the realm of vocabulary and meaning, the influence of general social and cultural change is very obvious. As society changes, new things that need new names

emerge. Modern attitudes, values, concepts and objects need new terms to handle them. And, because the world is constantly changing, words insensibly change their meanings. For example, "rock" means a pice of solidified mineral. "Rock" to a university student is a test which the faculty member used the preceding semester and will use again. A "rock" is solid support for the student's success.

The coexistence of several meanings in one word is extremely common. Dialects tend to widen the meanings of existing words in the standard language. This makes language slippery, however, it gives room for play in the language. The students take existing words and add additional meanings to them. For example, "zoo" is the ugly girls' dormitory.

The largest divergence between the standard language and the dialect is the use of lingualisms. In the coining of new words and phrases, Black Americans in modern times have been more exuberant and uninhibited than their white counterparts. They are less traditional and feel less restrained by linguistic restrictions.

The focus in this article is on words dealing with various aspects of campus life: the university, the campus, the faculty, the dormitory, the cafeteria and scholarship. And to enhance its meaning, short expressions and lexical items which are not usually found in pocket dictionaries are presented. The reader must be mindful that speech colloquialisms are fashionable in 1977 on the college campus, even if these expressions may drop out of the language after a brief span of time.

Various expressions for greetings appear on the Black campus. Seldom does one hear "Good Morning" or "Good Afternoon". Examples: "Hey now," "What it is?," "Hey, hey," "What's going down," "What's up man," "What's hip," "Hey y'all," "Look what the wind blew in?" "What's happening," "Where are the gigs?" "How you doin'," "What's the rap," "What's going on?" "What's the deal?" "What's up?" "Check". These greetings

are accompanied with the soul handshake.

Expressions of departure include such as: "Rap with you later," "Beef with you later," "Later on," "Be cool," "Hang tight," "Check you," "Solid," "Check it out," "Later," "Another time," "Jazz with you later".

Synonyms for the campus are: "hill," "yard," "on the dump," "the wall," "prison".

Lingualisms for the dormitory are: "zoo" (ugly girls' dormitory), "widows' rest" (girls have few dates or they are haughty), "freak capital" (dormitory with homosexuals), "rat hole" (dormitory with rats), "going back to the crib" (dormitory room), "pad".

On most college campuses, there is much interaction and communication between professors and students. The students provide nicknames—positively and negatively, affectionately and disapprovingly—to describe members of the faculty. The highest rank of a college teacher is full professorship. Students refer to any college teacher as the "Prof" if the person teaches the class. If the professor possesses a doctorate, he is affectionately called "Doc". The student addresses most professors this way if he desires to approach him in a warm fashion. Students seem to have a preference for the clipped word or monosyllables. The clipped word is recognized for what it is, and the parent word survives by its side.

Occasionally the professor is referred to as "the teach", which is a shortened version of the teacher. The definite article must be used, otherwise the listener would hear the verb "to teach." Other expressions for the teacher are: the "whip", for a strict teacher and "dummie," for a teacher with limited information. "Love man" is a professor who approaches a female student for sexual purposes. The "axe" is the teacher in whose class the student is failing. If the professor is reputedly from the "old school," it means he uses traditional methods in teaching. If the professor is a



"trip", it means he is impossible and incredible in his approach.

Derogatory terms for the faculty are: "pig," "brass," "uneducated educators," "knobs," "That dude is a trip," "moldies or oldies," "Dizzy heads," "the phantoms" (administrators of college are not seen until commencement).

Most university students complain of the food service on the campus. They feel a need for lingualisms to express hunger or the lack of tasty food. "Caf" (short for cafeteria), "grub" (food), "mystery meat" (bad taste or undefinable meat dishes), "grit or grease" (to eat, especially soul food, and enjoy it), "slop and crap" (cafeteria food), "I got the munchies" (to be hungry continuously), "I got the chews" (to be hungry), "hongries—hong—greeeees" (to eat), "Dog food," "horse shit," "feed my face" (eat). Terms for the cafeteria are: "mess hall," "tomane palace," or "caf".

Success or failure of the examination is important to the university student. Hence a score of expressions come into the dialect for the word test: "exam," "rocks," "radio," "where is the test coming from?" "where is the teacher coming from?" "crib" (cheat), "pony," "cheat—cheat" (notebook full of answers), "get over" (keep from flunking), "telegraph" (signals in a test), "key" (test), "Test was a bitch" (difficult test), "It is better to cheat than to repeat" (proverb—insensitivity to ethics), "burn it up" (write a good test), "map" (cheat sheet with large amounts of information), "it was a breeze" (easy test), "you blew it" (You flunked the test), "co-op" (cooperative effort by the whole class in cheating), "He flag me" (He flunks me), "open note" (Instead of an open book test which is legal, the student opens his notes secretly), "multiple guess" (the student takes a multiple choice test; his information is so limited that he makes a multiple of guesses), "micro copy" (sheet of answers), "It was a get over." (the test is very easy), "It's real cool." (the test was not too hard) "got to score" (make a good grade on the test), "I didn't put a dent in

it." (The student fails the test.), "I couldn't cut it," (No success in performance on the test).

Since studying is one of the main objectives of college life, many expressions arise to describe the mental action. Such expressions as: "get down," "hit the books," "crack the books," "book in," "going to the torture chamber" (attendance at a particular class), "booking," "getting in the books," "B.S. degree" (bull shit degree).

For verbal approbation, Black students use such expressions as: "right on," "let's get it together," and "talk, brother, talk." "Well" is a favorite expression but is used with a certain intonation and pronunciation (way-le). As the orator begins to explain his premise, he hears such shouts as: "Break it down," or "Bring it down front." If the student has the same opinion as the orator, he states often: "Better believe it". As the speaker establishes rapport with the student audience, he elicits such remarks: "Well, well, that's what he said." If the speaker develops the body of the speech with logic and cogency, the audience responds with "He's getting on down" or "He's coming on home."

The student recognizes his ideas in a speech as he shouts out: "Hang on in there," "Let it all hang out," or "That's what he said." In 1975 and 1976, the most often heard expression was "Right on!" However, students have a propensity for the verb "hang." It apparently fits every imaginable situation such as "hang in," "hang out," "Let it all hang out," "hang together." "I did that," "That's my man talking," are still common expressions. If the speech is unusually satisfactory and lucid to the listener, one hears such expressions as: "That was some beef" (the structure, theme and development of the speech pleased the student).

After the speech the student approaches frequently the speaker, compliments the speech and shakes the hand of the orator: "Give me five" (May I shake your hand?). Five refers to the fingers of

the hand. Another common expression for the handshake is: "Give me some skin!" Positive comments include: "You are for real." In standard English this statement translates as: candor, sincerity and honesty of the speaker. If the listener agrees completely with the major thesis of the speech, he states: "I was witcha all the way."

The idiom or slang is as necessary an ingredient of language as salt is to soup. It is the idiom and slangs that bring out the language's true flavor; it is this unique characteristic of language which most truly reflects the real mentality of the people—the soul power, if you will—for the slang penetrates into the subtlest variations of language. Although traditional language teachers and grammarians attack the slang and encourage the students and public to use the rich vocabulary of the language, the public finds its own expressions peculiar to its environment. Although the scholar and artist give us new possibilities in word usage in the language, the living language is actually associated with the people and through them it grows.

Since the urban college is often isolated from the rest of the community, students develop terms to depict their own needs and environment. As a group of students settle in their own enclave in a city or town, new words or meanings for words are coined to cope with the new environment. So there is a distinct vocabulary for the campus. Of course the words are borrowed from standard English and have been given an additional meaning. When local developments take place like this, it may or may not be adopted by the dominant language. However adoption of new meanings of words into the standard language is one method by which the language grows. □

*Joan Elliott, Ph.D., a Howard University alumna, is professor of German at Tennessee State University in Nashville.*



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